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SUBJECT: PRESSURE BUILDING ON ISRAELI GOVERNMENT TO ADDRESS
TERROR THREAT FROM GAZA STRIP

Classified By: Ambassador Richard H. Jones. Reasons: 1.4 (b)(d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Recent Kassam launches from the Gaza Strip into bordering Western Negev communities and the town of Sderot have ratcheted up the pressure on Israeli political and military leaders to react, especially as at least one Kassam landed near a kindergarten on the second day of school in Israel. Intense media focus -- including powerful TV footage of the attack on the school -- has encouraged Israeli leaders from the Prime Minister on down to call for a harsh response, possibly to include economic sanctions against the Palestinian population in Gaza. Media speculation has also resurrected the notion of a large-scale military ground operation in the Gaza Strip. According to press reports, a September 5 Security Cabinet meeting ruled out a large-scale IDF offensive for the time being, but called for a presentation of options to put pressure on Gaza's civilian population through electrical power shutoffs and crossing closures (which would impact fuel supplies). A September 9 Security Cabinet meeting will review those options further.
END SUMMARY.

KASSAM BARRAGES INCREASING PRESSURE ON GOI

¶2. (SBU) Pressure started to build the morning of September 2, as residents of Sderot -- a community abutting the Gaza Strip -- awoke to the news that a Kassam rocket had struck near a partially armored school the night before. Concern quickly spread among parents escorting their children to their first day of school that the Kassam launchers might be targeting schools. In anticipation of heightened public anxiety, elements of the Southern and Home Front Commands deployed in and around western Negev communities to provide visible security. Home Front Command and Gaza Division soldiers also patrolled the bus stops and schools in Sderot as a security measure, and to demonstrate to Sderot residents that the GOI is watching out for them. On the first day of school, soldiers and teachers reviewed with the school children the procedures for evacuating to nearby bomb shelters upon alert from Sderot's "Red Dawn" warning system.

¶3. (SBU) The Israeli media continued to focus on the Kassam threat throughout the following day (September 3) as nine more rockets were fired into the Western Negev and Sderot, with one landing near a Sderot kindergarten. Magen David Adom teams treated at least twelve children who suffered from shock, while Palestinian Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility

for the launches, saying that their rockets were -- according to Israeli media -- a "a gift for the new school year." Shortly after a morning attack, Sderot Mayor Eli Moyal accused the GOI of abandoning Sderot. The chairman of Sderot's "Parents Committee" told Israel Radio that Sderot's schools should be shut down, and that he plans to encourage parents to protest outside the Prime Minister's Office in Jerusalem. Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee Chairman Tzachi Hanegbi told Israel's Army Radio that the moment was nearing in which the IDF would have to enter the Gaza Strip: "At some stage, decided by Israel, there will be no choice but to wage a campaign in the Gaza Strip." President Peres told visiting Austrian Chancellor Gusenbauer that evening, " Hamas is trying our patience, but there is a limit. We cannot allow our children to be in danger, and we cannot allow this fanatical phenomenon to exist." PM Olmert told the Chancellor, "We need to hit higher in the terrorists' chain of command. We won't make compromises on this issue, we won't limit ourselves." Later that night, two Kassam rockets exploded south of Ashkelon, where a station supplying power to southern Israel is located.

¶4. (SBU) On September 4, Deputy Prime Minister Haim Ramon suggested in an interview with "Yedioth Ahronoth" that Israel should punish Gaza residents every time a Kassam is launched by stopping the supply of electricity, fuel and water to the Gaza Strip for 2-3 hours for each rocket launched. Ramon stressed that this would force the Palestinian residents to either stop the militants from launching the rockets, or suffer the consequences. Public commentators who previously criticized such reactions as extremist wrote afterwards that Ramon's suggestion was understandable in light of the television footage of the attack on the kindergarten shown throughout Israel the night before. At the UN, Israeli Ambassador Danny Gillerman said he would demand that the UN

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intervene to stop the fire, and that Israel would not continue its policy of restraint if the rocket launches from the Gaza Strip continued. Gillerman warned that Israel would launch an operation that would have harsh ramifications for the Palestinian Authority (PA), Hamas and the entire region.

¶5. (SBU) Israel Radio's mid-day news September 4 cited FM Tzippi Livni as telling the Knesset that if the situation in Gaza were to continue, Israel would have to act to prevent or to reduce rocket fire. She said that there were things that could be done without causing a humanitarian crisis that, while they might provoke international condemnation, would be acceptable actions to prevent terror. Opposition Leader Benjamin Netanyahu, who called the Knesset meeting, said that Israel's withdrawal from Gaza had created "Hamas-stan," and that Olmert and Barak's lack of response to the Kassam attacks would cause the attacks to continue and even reach central Israel.

GOI CONSIDERING POSSIBLE RESPONSES IN GAZA

¶6. (SBU) Israel's Security Cabinet met September 5 to discuss possible courses of action to respond to the Kassam fire, including IDF ground incursions, declaring launch sites in Gaza as off-limits, carrying out sonic booms over population areas, and further closing of Gaza's border crossings, thus halting delivery of humanitarian relief -- including fuel. DefMin Barak declared a 48-hour state of emergency in the communities abutting Gaza (including Sderot), placing the IDF in charge of them. He asked Israel's security establishment to examine the legal aspects of occasionally stopping the electricity supply to the Gaza Strip and withholding fuel shipments. Meanwhile, all of Sderot's schools were closed for the day, and parents and children were bussed to Jerusalem so that they could protest outside the Knesset and Prime Minister's Office. Sderot's Parents Committee submitted an urgent petition to Israel's High Court of

Justice asking it to order the state to provide interim solutions that allow Sderot's children to attend school outside the range of Kassams.

¶7. (SBU) Press reports after the five-hour Security Cabinet meeting cited DefMin Barak as saying, "As long as we have no system to intercept Kassam rockets, the solution will be deep offensive incursions into Gaza. At the same time, we will continue to fortify buildings -- particularly homes in Sderot." PM Olmert announced that he would instruct Israel's security establishment to formulate practical plans to counter the Kassam rockets. According to press reports, the proposals of Haim Ramon, Tzippi Livni, Labor Minister Eli Yishai and Minister for Religious Councils Yitzhak Cohen to apply pressure through utilities serving Gaza's population were discussed. Press reports suggest that Olmert and Barak agreed not to launch a large-scale ground operation for the Gaza Strip for the time being, but to have the IDF increase its small-unit incursions into the Gaza Strip to strike at specific targets based on high-quality intelligence. Unidentified security sources reportedly told journalists that the option of a large-scale incursion has been "suspended" so as not to torpedo the regional peace conference scheduled for November.

¶8. (SBU) A statement issued by the PM's Office following the meeting noted that "the Security Cabinet has been asked to prepare a plan...for striking at the services provided to the Gaza Strip by Israel in response to the continued criminal and indiscriminate attacks on the Israeli civilian population." The set of options is to be presented to the Security Cabinet at its next meeting scheduled for September

¶9. Dov Weissglas, an advisor to former PM Ariel Sharon, wrote in a September 5 op-ed in "Yedioth Ahronoth" that Israel, under the UN Charter, has the right to respond to the rocket attacks with economic sanctions against the residents of Gaza and its de-facto Hamas government. While he acknowledged that it would be a harsh response, he argued that it would be preferable to a military operation deep inside the Gaza Strip.

BACKGROUND AND COMMENT

¶9. (C) IDF incursions into Gaza by small units occur on almost a daily basis, with the units going after specific targets. Kassam rocket launches towards Sderot and Israeli communities in the western Negev desert are also frequent.

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At the highest levels, the Prime Minister's Office and the MOD have been reluctant to date to re-enter Gaza in force. MOD POL-MIL Bureau Chief MGEN (Res.) Amos Gilad recently told a visiting senior Congressional staffer that while Southern Commander MGEN Yoav Gallant is pushing for a large-scale campaign in Gaza, IDF Chief of Staff LTG Gabi Ashkenazi opposes it. The view among the senior GOI and IDF leadership -- including PM Olmert, DefMin Barak, Gilad and Ashkenazi -- is that it would be easy to get back into Gaza, but much more difficult for Israel to pull out once it has re-entered. Those in the MOD more familiar with Gaza's features say that any large-scale force re-entering Gaza would be engulfed by amorphous opposition forces. The IDF would suffer casualties, and large numbers of Palestinian civilians would be injured and killed. All of this would take place under intense international media coverage. As tensions with Syria continue, PM Olmert holds talks with PA President Abbas to prepare for the Fall international meeting, and Israelis are approaching the Jewish High Holidays, the GOI would understandably prefer to avoid any escalation of hostilities unless absolutely necessary.

¶10. (C) While Embassy Tel Aviv has no indications at this time that the GOI is planning to launch a large-scale operation in Gaza, a successful Kassam strike on a school in

Sderot or some other target resulting in significant civilian casualties could change this overnight. Israeli security sources also note that the Palestinian terrorist groups in Gaza are extending the range of their Kassams. A successful strike against the power station in Ashkelon would also likely force a deadly response. Many Israeli observers say a large-scale campaign to clear out the Hamas military wing, similar to the IDF's 2002 offensive in the West Bank, is just one successful terrorist strike away.

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JONES